



WORLD WAR ONE - ROLL OF HONOUR

FRANCIS WILLIAM FERRIS

Private (2034), 11th Battalion (Service), The Royal Fusiliers

Killed in Action, Nr. Cherisy, Arras, France - 3 May 1917

Francis William Ferris was born in Woodborough, Wiltshire on Sunday, 14th September 1890, the son of Francis William Ferris and Jeannette Ferris (nee Fidler), who had married in 1882. The birth was announced in the Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette published on 18th September.

Francis William (Senior) was employed by Pewsey District Council and is recorded as being a Sanitary Inspector and District Road Surveyor, respectively, on the 1901 and 1911 census returns for Woodborough.

Francis William (Jnr) was the youngest of three children and the only son – there being two older sisters (Ada and Margaret).

On the 1911 census, Francis is recorded as living with his parents at The Cottage, Woodborough. Francis, now aged 20 and still a single man, is a Bank Clerk with the Capital & Counties Bank.

However, work with the Bank took Francis away from Woodborough sometime before the outbreak of war. Francis is recorded as having enlisted with The Royal Fusiliers at Horley, Sussex (which is also listed as his residence), although the precise date is unknown.

The Royal Fusiliers was also known as the City of London Regiment and many of the recruits were workers in the City of London. Although the Church Memorial to Francis states that the 11th Battalion was the Bankers Battalion this was the name officially given to the 26th Battalion, but doubtless many of the recruits that joined at the same time as Francis would also be bank workers.

The 11th Battalion was formed at Hounslow in September 1914, eventually being posted to France in July 1915. The medal records for Francis make no reference to an award for the 1914-15 Star, so it seems likely that he enlisted in either 1916, or 1917 (only the British and Victory medals were awarded).

However, Francis was clearly in France with the 11th Battalion by March 1917 which was then based just outside Cherisy near Arras, after German forces had pulled back to new positions behind the Hindenburg Line.

The attack on Cherisy that took place on 3 May 1917, which formed part of the Second Battle of Arras, was the first real attack against the new German positions in the Hindenburg Line. The objective of the attack was to force the line of the Sensee River between Cherisy to the north (left) and Fontaine-les-Croisilles on the south (right), then to push forward to the high ground east of Cherisy, and dig in there. For most of the attacking force, this would involve crossing the Fontaine Trench about 500 yards from the forming up line, which was heavily wired and occupied by German forces.

The assaulting battalions were the Middlesex Regiment on the left and the Bedfordshire Regiment on the right. 'B Company' of the 11th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (under Captain Nelson Neate – although from Hounslow, a Marlborough College Old Boy) was attached to the Middlesex Regiment with orders to "mop-up" Cherisy village. Two platoons of 'D Company' of 11th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers were attached to the Bedfordshire Regiment for "mopping-up." The remaining elements of the 11th Battalion were held in reserve, or used to move up munitions.

The attack commenced at 4 a.m. (before first light), but with no landmarks to guide the troops in the dark, it was almost impossible to maintain direction. Within 20 to 30 seconds a German barrage commenced and the rear companies suffered severe casualties in simply passing over their own front lines. Ultimately, after a slow advance in the dark, much of the attacking force was held up in front of the Fontaine Trench where they found thick uncut wire.

However, on the far left (which bypassed the Fontaine Trench), parts of the Middlesex Regiment and B Company of The Royal Fusiliers under Captain Neate succeeded in their initial advance clearing Cherisy of German troops. They were soon afterwards strongly counter-attacked from the right, and the Germans regained possession of the village. Very few men and no officer entering the village either from 'B Company', or the Middlesex Regiment, returned. Captain Neate was last heard of firing his revolver at advancing German troops and his death was later confirmed.

In the middle of the morning, about 9 a.m., 'C Company' of the Royal Fusiliers was ordered to attack Fontaine Trench. There was no preliminary bombardment, or barrage, as the survivors of the dawn attack (including elements of 'D Company' supporting the Bedfordshire Regiment) were still lying out in front of the line of Fontaine Trench and in No Man's Land. It was not a very hopeful project and as soon as they got over the ridge 150 yards in front of the allied front line they met fire from machine guns and field guns and lost heavily. Again, the wire in front of Fontaine Trench proved too formidable an obstacle,

and most of the line had to drop into shell-holes, where they were pinned down by heavy machine-gun fire for the rest of the day.

Small elements of the Bedfordshire Regiment did succeed in entering and clearing parts of the Fontaine Trench and beyond but, ultimately, they were all killed in the advance.

Another attack was ordered for the evening, at about 7:15 p.m., with the object of taking Fontaine Trench, or at least extricating what was left of the two assaulting battalions which had gone over before dawn. The attack was led by the Northamptonshire Regiment supported by elements of the Bedfordshire Regiment. However, although there was some success in entering and clearing the Fontaine Trench from the left, they were unable to hold it.

Later that night Captain Shepherd and Company Sergeant-Major Tack of the Northamptonshire Regiment went out in the darkness and guided in the men who had been lying out before the German wire. This was no easy job in the darkness, and at least one party, seeing the guides advancing, took them for Germans, and made off in the other direction, and were not seen again. So ended a bad day.

On the following day (4th May), the 11th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers effectively held the same position that they had at the start of the previous day and under Brigade Orders, were relieved of their positions, and returned to their old quarters at Neuville Vitasse.

We do not know for certain in which Company of the 11th Battalion Francis William Ferris served, whether it was B Company that lost many men in Cherisy, or with C and D Company that suffered in front of the Fontaine Trench.

The War Diary for the 11th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers records casualties for the three days (2nd to 4th May 1917) as follows: Killed - 2 officers, 10 other ranks; Missing - 3 officers, 32 other ranks; and Wounded - 2 officers, 74 other ranks.

Francis is remembered on the Arras Memorial at Faubourg-D'Amiens Cemetery in France, there being no grave.

In addition to the memorial plaque in Woodborough Church for all those from the Parish that lost their lives in World War I, Francis is remembered in a second plaque in the Church paid for by his family.

"TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND IN EVER LOVING MEMORY
OF OUR DEAR AND ONLY SON
FRANCIS WILLIAM FERRIS
PRIVATE – THE ROYAL FUSILIERS – BANKERS BATTN
WHO GAVE HIS LIFE IN THE SERVICE OF HIS COUNTRY
NEAR CHERISY – IN THE SECOND BATTLE OF ARRAS
MAY 3RD 1917 – AGED 26 YEARS
"YOUR LIFE IS HID WITH CHRIST IN GOD" Col III. 3" .